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## **Introduction - A Turbulent Decade: Social Protest Movement and the Labour Movement, 1965-1975**

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## INTRODUCTION

by ROWAN CAHILL

The Conference, 'Social Protest Movements and the Labour Movement, 1965-1975', was held in Sydney on September 22-23, 2001. It took place eleven days after Muslim militants crashed hijacked airliners into the World Trade Centre in New York and into the Pentagon, and nine days after the Australian government, in consultation with the United States government, invoked relevant provisions of the ANZUS treaty equating an attack on the US as an attack on Australia's peace and safety. Australia was heading for military involvement in a war against the hapless, impoverished nation of Afghanistan – a war that US President George W. Bush ominously termed 'the first war of the twenty-first century', as he pointed the finger at Islamic militant Osama bin Laden and made war against terrorism the focus of his Administration.

Racism and hysteria gained ground in Australia. A spirit similar to Cold War McCarthyism gripped the nation; criticism of the US and its conduct in world affairs was deemed tantamount to siding with terrorism, in the same way during the 1950s and 1960s, that criticism of the US was deemed to equate with communism. Anti-Muslim graffiti appeared on the walls of Mosques and Islamic schools in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane; arson attacks were to follow. Australian Muslims, particularly women and children, were verbally and physically assaulted; radio talk-back programs enthusiastically aired anti-Muslim sentiments.

For many Conference participants it was a time for sober reflection. The hysteria, fear and ignorance that characterised public discourse and reaction since September 11 was reminiscent of Cold War Australia, when truth was hard to find, information was not freely disseminated, and informed discourse was discouraged. The social protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s had their roots in opposition to these sorts of social and political forces and to the type of culture they engendered.

The Conference was framed around, and between, two landmark years in Australian history. In 1965 the Liberal-Country Party coalition government of Sir Robert Menzies committed a battalion of troops to the war in Vietnam, dramatically increasing Australia's involvement which had until then been limited to military advisers. (The initial involvement, beginning in 1962, consisted of thirty advisers). In 1975 Malcolm Fraser successfully challenged for the Liberal Party leadership and went on to orchestrate the dismissal of the reformist Whitlam Labor government. Labor had come to power in 1972 after 23 years in Opposition, the political and cultural radicalism of the 1960s and early '70s acting as its political midwife.<sup>1</sup>

Between 1965 and 1975 Australia changed dramatically and significantly, warranting description as a 'cultural revolution' by the education historian, Alan Barcan.<sup>2</sup> As social historian, Donald Horne, has pointed out, for most of the twentieth-century 'the prevailing culture in Australia included racist, anglocentric-imperialist, puritan, sexist, politically genteel acquiescent, capitalist, bureaucratic and developmentalist strains.'<sup>3</sup> It was during the period 1965-1975 that the skids were put under this 'prevailing culture', with much of the challenge and impetus for change coming from social protest

movements subscribing to an interpretation of democracy at odds with the prevailing understanding that 'democracy depended on quiescence among the citizens'.<sup>4</sup>

The period seeded the future with movements and ideas that challenged and changed Australian society and culture as women, aborigines, gays, lesbians and environmentalists variously articulated, demanded, claimed, struggled and gained attention and rights previously denied. Perhaps its greatest legacy was in striking an almighty blow for the legitimisation of protest in this country, 'enlarging the space for democratic action'.<sup>5</sup>

Not that a desire and propensity for change did not exist prior to 1965. It did. As Mark Davis has pointed out, a mood for change built during the final years of the Menzies government, 'an urgent sense that a shift was needed in social and administrative priorities'. This mood found expression, for example, in books like Robin Boyd's *Australian Ugliness* (1960), Peter Coleman's edited collection *Australian Civilization* (1962) and his *Obscenity, Blasphemy, Sedition: Censorship in Australia* (1962), and Donald Horne's iconic best-seller *The Lucky Country* (1964).<sup>6</sup> But the prevailing culture remained intact, to the extent that during the 1950s and early '60s there was a steady exit of creative youthful talent to cultural Meccas overseas, seeking liberation from being hemmed in and stultified by the 'sanctimonious Australia of Robert Gordon Menzies'.<sup>7</sup>

What set the ball of protest and change irrevocably rolling were the events of 1965 - the linkage by the Menzies government of conscription with service overseas, and the increased military commitment to the Vietnam War. The first conscript to be killed in the conflict was Errol Noack, tuna fisherman and factory worker, who died in hospital on 24 May 1966, ten days after arriving in Vietnam. He had been hit in the stomach by a burst of machine-gun fire whilst on patrol in Bien Hoa province.<sup>8</sup>

The commitment of a battalion almost immediately generated protests, coming as it did the day after the Defence Act was amended to allow conscripts to be deployed overseas for combat service, ending the use of conscripts solely for home defence enshrined in legislation since 1903.

Conscription, or 'National Service' as it was euphemistically known in Australia, had been introduced in 1964 without public debate, as a *fait accompli*. Beginning in January 1965, twenty-year old men (in reality 'boys' because the right to vote and adult status were not attained until reaching the age of twenty-one) were selectively conscripted for two years of full-time military service by a birthday lottery-ballot system.

There was a long, divisive, Australian tradition of compulsory military service, with various schemes in place from 1911 to 1929, 1939 to 1945, and 1951 to 1960. Each of these generated wide ranging resistance, from the personal to the organised. The first period initially involved 'boy conscription', targeting all fit males between the ages of 12 and 26. Official, probably conservative, figures show that during the period from the scheme's introduction to the end of June 1915, there were 27,749 prosecutions and at least 7093 imprisonments for resistance to the scheme.<sup>9</sup> Two attempts to introduce conscription for overseas service during World War 1 polarised the nation, at times violently so, and were rejected by the Australian people when put to referendums.

Initially, anti-Vietnam War and anti-conscription activity tended to be quietist and educational in the sense that the preferred mode of struggle took the form of Letters to the Editor, petitions, small peaceful demonstrations, educative public meetings with guest speakers and the possibility of generating media coverage of dissident opinion, and the circulation of literature contesting government policies.

As Australia's involvement in the War intensified, opposition grew and also intensified. Protest action increasingly became confrontational and disruptive, the new mood signalled by a demonstration involving the blocking of Pitt Street, Sydney, during peak hour on the evening of 22 October 1965.<sup>10</sup>

The War brought into existence a mushroom growth of anti-war, protest groups and organisations, often obtrusive in that their style and tactics demanded and gained public and political attention, to the extent that in 1969 Federal Cabinet considered draconian legislation to curb free speech, the right of assembly, and anti-war protest.<sup>11</sup> However, the first protests against the War came from long established political organisations and from activists with radical track records and/or family links to a dissenting/oppositional past, and from an established peace movement with a history, tradition, and organisational links that can be traced back to the small groups that formed during the early twentieth-century to oppose Australian and British involvement in the Boer War.<sup>12</sup>

The point is that the period 1965 to 1975, with all its drama, colour and sense of the New, was not unconnected with the Australian past - a connection evident in many of the proceedings of the Conference. This point is at odds with the dismissive conservative tendency to portray the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s as divorced from Australian history, with the protest and ideas of the period being derivative and imitative of what was happening overseas, instead of being rooted in Australian political events, culture and tradition.

As Barry York has observed in regard to student radicalism during the 1960s and early 1970s:

it is a pity that the near-obsession of most commentators with the 'derived' nature of the Australian student movement has blinded them to the centrally-important political catalyst within Australia. We read so often of Australian students responding to the May rebellion in Paris, France. Yet the abundance of evidence points more in the direction of Canberra; for it was there that amendments to the National Service Act (including a clause obligating the 'principal officers of educational institutions' to supply information about their students) were being debated. And it was these amendments which marked the turning-point in campus activism within Australia.<sup>13</sup>

Segmentation of the past into manageable units, decades as in 'the fifties', 'the sixties', 'the seventies', or into eras as in 'the decade of dissent' or 'the protest era' (circa 1965-1975) is useful, facilitating the close study of specific chunks of time isolated from the complexities of the entire past. However, isolation can also separate segments from the past to the extent that connections and relationships with what has gone before are unacknowledged. Eric Hobsbawm rejected segmentation in his study, *Age of Extremes*:



*The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (1994), treating the sixties as part of a period beginning in 1945 with the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan, and the start of the Cold War, running through to the global economic crises of the 1970s.

Right-wing conservatives have used the segmentation process to play ideological mind games, amongst them British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (in 1982) and American Professor Allan Bloom (in 1986). For Thatcher the 'fashionable theories and permissive claptrap' of the sixties created the undisciplined, unrestrained society she had to whip back into shape, while Bloom dismissed the tertiary rebellion and intellectual ferment of the sixties by likening it to German Nazism during the 1930s, readings of the past nourished by the narrowness and isolation of the segmentation process.<sup>14</sup>

A snowball effect was generated by the Vietnam War. The centuries long struggle of the Vietnamese people for national independence, Australia's part in the latest episode of imperialist history and the way this was explained, justified and conducted on the home-front, led many Australians, especially amongst the post-war baby-boomers, to develop wide ranging radical, political and social critiques. These led to personal transformations and to political actions that challenged accepted decision making processes and many of the social manifestations of power, from the power of the state, to the power involved in personal relationships, and to the ways in which race and gender were constructed and construed.

The Labour Movement - the trade unions, the ALP, the small parties and organisations to the Left of the ALP - was variously affected by, and helped influence and shape the cultural revolution of 1965-1975. For many young people the ALP came to represent the promise of an end to conscription and Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, and especially after Gough Whitlam became leader in February 1967, their hopes for a better society in which egalitarian and social justice principles could take rein. For many of these people the 1969 and 1972 Federal elections, the last gasps of the Cold War, were their political introductions.

However, it was not until the Tet Offensive dramatically exposed the spurious 'we will win, we are winning' rhetoric of the US and its allies in February 1968, that Australian public opinion began to dramatically shift against involvement in the War. Expediently, the Whitlam ALP leadership began to harden its general opposition to the War, promising in October 1969 to bring Australian troops home and in 1971 to repeal the National Service Act. Well before this, it was the dogged opposition to conscription and criticisms of 'the immorality and the horrors of the war in Vietnam' of ALP leader Arthur Calwell (1960-1967), echoing the anti-conscription, anti-British sentiments of his youth in 1916, and the energetic and informed anti-war opposition of left labor politician Dr. Jim Cairns, that cast the ALP as a key player in the cultural revolution that defined the period.<sup>15</sup>

This book is largely structured in the same way as the Conference - there are eight sections looking respectively at the anti-Vietnam War and anti-Conscription movements, the Student and New Left movements, Women's Liberation, the movements for Gay and Lesbian Rights, the Aboriginal Land Rights and Civil Rights movements, the anti-

Apartheid movement, the Trade Union movement, and the ALP between 1965-1972. The speakers gathered by Conference organisers were all veterans of the movements, campaigns and struggles they recollected and reflected upon. Their words as published have been lightly edited from tape recordings to ensure continuity, and to eliminate such things as repetition, repartee, possible legal problems, and the like. In the main these are not academically researched and footnoted papers, but rather what they were at the outset, talks by period activists; some assume a common inside knowledge, as is the case when friends and comrades gather. But for all that, what we have in the end are recollections and reflections, at times sensitive and vulnerable, much of it new to the public record, which ideally will enrich future research and writing about the period.

This collection is a contribution to plugging the political and cultural gap in the historical record relating to Australia in the 1960s and early 1970s. Despite impressions to the contrary, there is an absence of accounts from participants in the period's rebellion and militancy. As author Michael Hyde, himself a prominent Melbourne-based radical of the period, recently observed, 'those of us who were in the midst of that mighty social and political upheaval that shook the world have been conveniently forgotten. Don't let it happen.'<sup>16</sup>

I take minor issue here with Hyde. Arguably it was not a matter of being 'conveniently forgotten', but rather 'deliberately forgotten'. During the late 1970s, and through the following two decades, Australia's political and cultural conservatives networked, insinuated themselves in institutions, linked with the money of big business, and rallied to destroy the hope and social justice legacies of the sixties and early seventies, promoting notions of democracy as theatre and entertainment rather than as hands-on involvement and participation by informed, concerned, critical citizens. Otherwise it could not be business as usual.

Not only had the legacies of the period to be dismantled, but the future had to be locked up so that something similar to the tumult and change and empowerment of the sixties and early seventies could not happen again, which is basically what the agenda of the Howard Federal government has been since it came to power in 1996. As part of this destructive process the period had to be trivialised, marginalised, portrayed as an alien, hedonistic, blip on the otherwise clear-radar-screen of Australian history, and silenced, leaving those who value the period with 'the task of reviving dreams and resuscitating memory'.<sup>17</sup>

For the most part the book is focused on New South Wales and Sydney. The Conference was organised with this in mind, in an attempt to place on record experiences fleetingly glimpsed elsewhere by writers elaborating a national perspective<sup>18</sup>, and to demonstrate the myriad ways in which the social protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, while being national in one sense, reflected and were shaped by a complexity of local factors. This point was later emphasised by the proceedings of the 'Radical Times: Brisbane in the Sixties and Seventies Conference' organised by the Brisbane Labour History Association (September 2002).<sup>19</sup>

*Rowan Cahill\**

## ENDNOTES

- \* Feedback from colleagues Damien Cahill, Terry Irving, and Beverley Symons, was helpful in my writing of this Introduction.
1. The term 'political midwife' has been appropriated from Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett, *Seizures of Youth. The Sixties and Australia*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1991, p.13.
  2. Alan Barcan, *Radical Students: The Old Left at Sydney University*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 2002, p.1.
  3. Donald Horne, *Time of Hope: Australia 1966-72*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1980, p. 5.
  4. Ibid.
  5. The quoted words belong to Paul Strangio, made in reference to the career of Dr. Jim Cairns and his role in the anti-Vietnam War movement. See the obituary for Cairns by Strangio, 'Jim Cairns (04.10.1914-12.10.2003)', *Labour History*, Number 86, May 2004, p. 204.
  6. Mark Davis, 'Towards Cultural Renewal', in Nathan Hollier (editor), *Ruling Australia. The Power, Privilege and Politics of the New Ruling Class*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2004, pp.182-183.
  7. G. B. Harrison, *Night Train to Granada. From Sydney's Bohemia to Franco's Spain: An Offbeat Memoir*, Pluto Press, Annandale, 2002, p. 9.
  8. Walter Noack, Errol's father, reflects on his son's death, conscription, and the Vietnam War, in Greg Langley, *A Decade of Dissent. Vietnam and the conflict on the Australian home front*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1992, pp. 49-51, 211.
  9. Australia's first, and often overlooked, encounter with conscription is detailed in John Barrett, *Falling In: Australians and 'Boy Conscription', 1911-1915*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1979. ); see also Bobbie Oliver, *Peacemongers: Conscientious Objectors to Military Service in Australia, 1911-1945*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1997, pp. 11-28.
  10. Ann Curthoys, 'Mobilising Dissent: The Later Stages of Protest', in Gregory Pemberton (editor), *Vietnam Remembered*, Lansdowne, Sydney, 2000, pp. 138-141.
  11. The proposed legislation became public in January 2000, when the 1969 Cabinet documents were released by the Australian Archives. The legislation was proposed by Attorney-General Nigel Bowen, a month before the 1969 October Federal election. New offences included 'unlawful assembly', 'riot', 'bringing of a foreign government into disrepute', 'assembly near a diplomatic mission or consular office', 'intimidation or harassment to draw attention to Commonwealth law or policy'. Penalties included jail terms of between six months and three years, and fines of \$500. The Gorton Cabinet kept the proposed legislation secret because it was likely to generate a great deal of public criticism, and was legally contentious.
  12. The Australian anti-war and peace movements have attracted many researchers, but much of their work has not been published, or exists in journal article form (some of it in outlets not considered 'academic'). For a brief, useful overview of the long history and tradition of the Australian peace movement see Malcolm Saunders and Ralph Summy, *The Australian Peace Movement: A Short History*, Peace Research Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1986 (Appendix 1 and Appendix 11, pp. 74-76, contain valuable introductory bibliographical data to the area).
  13. Barry York, *Student Revolt! La Trobe University, 1967-73*, Nicholas Press, Campbell (ACT), 1989, p. 8.
  14. Thatcher and Bloom cited in Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties. Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-1974*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 4.
  15. 'the immorality...' quote is from the speech by Calwell at the Mosman Town Hall in 1966, on the night he survived an assassination attempt. For a discussion of ALP policy on the Vietnam War see Rick Kuhn, 'The Australian Left, Nationalism and the Vietnam War', *Labour History*, Number 72, May 1997, pp. 165-167; and for the ALP response to the anti-war movement, M. Saunders, 'The ALP's Response to the Anti-Vietnam War Movement: 1965-73', *Labour History*, Number 44, May 1983, pp. 75-91.
  16. Michael Hyde, *Hey Joe*, The Vulgar Press, North Carlton, 2003, p.214. During the sixties and early seventies, Hyde was a prominent student militant based at Monash University, Melbourne. *Hey Joe* is possibly the first Australian novel to tell the story of the period from the point of view of a militant.
  17. Anthony Ashbolt, 'Hegemony and the Sixties: observations, polemics, meanderings', unpublished Workshop paper, p.15, 'Hegemony: Explorations into Consensus, Coercion and Culture' Workshop, University of Wollongong, 14 and 15 February, 2005.
  18. See, for example, Donald Horne, *Time of Hope*, and Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett, *Seizures of Youth*.
  19. For a report on the Brisbane conference see Drew Cottle, 'Radical Times: Brisbane in the Sixties and Seventies', *Labour History*, Number 84, May 2003, pp. 121-122.